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ABSTRACT

Changes in the structure of instruction in schools may affect a variety of participants in the educational system. These first-person narratives from teachers, staff, parents and students detail how each was affected by the change to mixed-age programming in kindergarten through third grade. Participants came from a number of schools in three western states, and represented schools in rural regions, small towns, suburbs, and cities. These narratives were collected through site observations, interviews, focus groups, staff training materials such as self-study scoring sheets, and training session evaluations. When these stories are brought together, common patterns surface as to what participants like or thought worked, and what was hard and remains difficult. Important factors in making a successful transition to the new program are highlighted, including: having a shared vision; focusing on staff development; and involving administrators, teachers and families in planning for and implementing change. Common outcomes of this process include the way teachers rethought and improved teaching practice and content, the new partnerships between teachers and families, the increasing professional satisfaction, and the difficulties in implementing mixed-age grouping. (JPB)

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Stories From Three States: Changing to Mixed-Age Primaries

A Paper Presented at
American Educational Research Association

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Abstract

Participants in K-3 mixed-age programming provide stories from various levels of school systems in several schools in three western states. The schools represent the range of school in the West - rural, small towns, suburban, and inner city. The stories were collected through site observations, interviews, focus groups, staff training materials such as self study scoring sheets, and training session evaluations. Common necessary ingredients surface in the stories: having a shared vision; focusing staff development; and involving administrators, teachers, and families in planning for and implementing change. The common outcomes of schools working this way were: teachers rethinking and improving teaching practice and content, families and teachers setting up new ways to partner, increasing professional satisfaction - and headaches. But most importantly, successful schools kept searching how to make the school work better for children

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abstract

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*"Nothing in nature grows from the top down,
but then most of the seeds come from there".*

Anonymous

Some trees, are tall, strong, and reach out to their surroundings in ways that enrich the ecosystem. Other trees are less sturdy and do not adapt well to changes. What are the differences in these two types of trees? What role does the tree play and what role does the forest play? What can a managing forester learn from the robust tree and do to shore up the struggling one?

Schools are like trees and just like the forester, we can learn from looking at stories schools tell about what helped them make and gain from using a change vehicle like mixed-age primaries. The stories and lessons presented here are about mixed-age programming, grades K-3. Participants in the stories are from various levels of the system in several schools in three western states. The schools represent the range of school in the West - rural, small towns, suburban, and inner city. The states vary in the amount of support for this type of reform as well. One state has a formal agenda for encouraging mixed-age primaries set in legislative reform, one state has an informal agenda voiced by principal and teacher professional groups, and one has no agenda supporting mixed-age programming.

The stories were collected through site observations, interviews, focus groups, staff training materials such as self study scoring sheets, and training session evaluations. The information was gathered as part of consulting support with schools who elected mixed-age programs. Since these schools are volunteers seeking support, their stories may reflect more success than a random effort to gather information or stories from schools required to change. When all the stories come together, common patterns surface of what participants liked or thought worked, and what was hard and remains difficult. The stage for the stories is set with thoughts from children since they are why we try reforms in the first place. The voices in the stories move on to families, teachers, and principals.

Children: The Reason We Start It All

When K-2 children are asked about what they like about being in mixed-age programs they often describe learning within a social context. In response to the question, "How does it feel to have help from bigger kids?", Layannah replied, "Big kids are good because you can talk to them and play with them". Children seldom appear hung up about academics. Although they are sometimes glad to learn to "write a triangle" as DeMarco proudly says, more often they express pleasure when playing soccer with a mix of ages where their skills fit, or at learning to build especially good houses in the blocks

because older children have more building tips. They even learn that cooperation between children of different ages and skills can be a boon to getting tasks done faster. This was the case when Natalie (age 8) and Holly (age 6) needed to write a book for a class assignment. Holly wrote faster and better than Natalie, but Natalie had more life experiences and came up with the idea of using the pattern format of a question book the class had used earlier in the year. Holly thought this was a grand idea and said, "Yeah, Let's do it".

The social nature of learning spills over into learning outside of the classroom. Children recognize the importance of being responsible such as Brendan who notes, "Even though smaller kids are smaller, you shouldn't call them names, even if they call you names first". Playing new roles is another learning opportunity. Sukey, who is the youngest in her family, suddenly found herself in the role of being among the oldest in the classroom and discovered that she could now do things that others couldn't. She quit worrying about competing with her older sister because, "I will grow up and do things Sara can do". And, for very able five-year-old children like Madaline and her friend Alexis, they discover you need to be patient with both younger and older kids who don't read as well as you.

These social lessons and bonds having staying power. For example, one group of third graders who "graduated" from a K-2 mixed-aged classroom truly miss their younger friends and asked to start a special day to eat lunch with long-time younger friends. Now the old friends eat lunch every Friday and continue sharing social news from K-2 and what third grade is really like.

The mix of ages creates a magic brew for some children and as one teacher confessed, "I have learned how to get out of the way when children start to help each other. Children are so much more capable than I once thought, especially five year olds. Children write and read more and sooner in my mixed-age classroom because they see older kids do it right in front of them. They don't need to wait for me to help". The climate of mixed-ages makes it safer for them to guess.

Yet another teacher, her principal, and a parent (also a teacher in the school) told of wringing their hands over the slow academic process of one child. He was happy to come to his K-2 classroom, but did not start reading until grade 2. As the parent-teacher said, "I had a hard time following my own advice when it was my own child. I gained empathy for other parents, but had my faith renewed that not all children blossom at the same time. I just didn't want to see the steady progress he was making because he wasn't reading yet".

These stories tell us that many of the lessons of mixed-age are social and developmental in nature. If we listen, we can see what is important to children and gain insight on how to use the positive and flexible social climate of mixed-age to aid both academic and social skills.

Family Voices Tell About Inclusion, Empowerment, Relationships, And Constant Communication

Honest Inclusion

Some credit for the development of children's solid social and academic skills is due to families as true educational partners. In all the programs visited for these stories, families are now involved in ways they had not been, suggesting a new level of mutual trust, respect, and skill. Parents talked about their appreciation for being included in study groups in some schools when mixed-aged was in the planning stages. Parents from other sites spoke of feeling reassured at having their questions honestly answered about being guinea pigs.

Teachers talked about the subtle change they saw on both sides when they stopped using the term parents and began using the more generic term families. The language change acknowledged the reality that many children have an array of caring and connected adults at home - not only mothers and fathers.

Empowerment

One staff told of parents nudging them along once a pilot program of three classrooms got started. In this school, parents inside the program as well as those out of it saw the potential and went to the site council asking to expand the program. Five years later, every grade 1-3 classroom was mixed-age, with K being the only straight grade in the primary. This was only because no one had found a mutually satisfactory way to work around the half-day kindergarten funding the school received from the state.

In two of the schools, the site council and Title I Parent Involvement Specialist work with a committed group of parent volunteers who serve as a welcome-wagon committee with parents new to the school. The welcoming committee buddies with new parents to help acquaint them with mixed-aged. Parents talking to parents reduces part of the burden teachers feel over the time it takes to answer questions from new families and help them feel connected.

Relationships

How do you gain that type of support? Relationships are the key. In the beginnings of mixed-age programs parents of older children, especially bright older children, often expressed concern that their children will not learn enough. In all these programs, active, project-oriented, thematic study is used. And, the parents of the older bright students saw the children happy and challenged. One parent explained, "George now loves to do research. He helped figure out which lawn mower we should buy. He figured out how big it should be by measuring the lawn and thinking about what size would be best. He went with his dad and even tipped over all the mowers to see the blades". Teachers in these classrooms report these same parents are now their biggest supporters and ask to have their next child in the class. In most of these classrooms, sets of siblings are enrolled in the same classroom, easing communication and coordination for families.

Examples of the many ways parents now show support include:

- seeing homework is done;
- coming to student-led conferences;
- raising money for field trips and then coming along;
- visiting school to share tools and stories about their jobs as musicians, health care professionals, carpenters, sewer workers;
- volunteering as parents or grandparents, including Grandma Betty who kept coming for two years after Josh went to another school to listen to children read;
- learning to do teacher tasks like Ava's mom who learned to do running records or Robin's mom who learned to do writer's conferences;
- running a science lab one afternoon a week when budget cuts meant the science teacher lost her job; and,
- serving on site councils and parent committees.

The point of this list is that longer term teacher-family relationships help create a comfort zone, knowledge, and a sense of community that goes both ways. For example, Ava's mom and Robin's mom learned skills that they used for six years, through two successive children in the program. Teachers, families, and children benefit.

A Need for Constant Communication

The biggest drawback to dialogue with families about breaking with tradition is that families are constantly passing through the school every few years. Not all are repeat users with multiple and endless children. So, communication about the program, why it is there, and what it can do must be constant, if home - school relationships are to remain strong.

Two-way trust takes time to develop and maintain. Even though it is more comfortable to ignore the few negative people, some attention must be paid to them. Is their message important even if it is couched in negative terms? It remains a challenge to know when to contain parental concerns to the few parents involved and when to listen carefully for kernels of truth about needed improvements and relationship repair in the bigger community.

Teacher Voices Tell of Teacher Profiles, Learning Together First, Shared Visions, and Challenges

Profiles of Successful Mixed-Age Teachers

Many types of teachers with different teaching styles and personalities have run mixed-aged classrooms. What are the characteristics teachers themselves identify as of keys to being a successful mixed-age teacher? In conversations with teachers in all of these schools, a consistent message comes through about what they think it took to successfully run a mixed-age classroom:

- bring strong backgrounds in child development;
- possess strong curriculum and project work knowledge;
- know how to individualize and manage several skills levels at once;
- exhibit flexibility and willingness to try many new things;
- apply knowledge about developmentally appropriate practice; and,
- working hard, because it is harder than you think.

These same teachers personally found it rewarding to teach in mixed-age groups: it keeps them fresh and challenged. Many, but not all, team taught or planned with a team. The mix of ages and teaming in the words of one teacher, "encouraged me to try new things and not do favorite units over and over. I have not done the same unit once in the six years in this program".

Prior Study

In all cases, some type of prior study and discussion took place before mixed-aged programming was undertaken. Teachers formed study groups at the school site and/or joined study groups with teachers from several sites. Each teacher, depending on her background found something different to be the most valuable. For example, some found time with their colleagues to talk about best practice in some type of structured format like a self study the most helpful. Some read a book and discussed it together. Some mapped out what curriculum could and should look like in a mixed-age program. Some visited other existing sites to see and hear for themselves and then planned how the lessons applied in their own school. Some tried following their children up a grade for a year before embarking on mixed-age. Some tried more than one of these ways to learn more before they started. They all thought before the leap.

Shared Vision

Even though there are individual paths to setting up mixed-age classrooms, there was a shared vision with at least a small group. Most visions centered around what is best for children. Principals all strongly supported this approach, and district leadership at least allowed this reform effort even if they did not openly encouraged it.

Examples of how seriously these schools took the idea of creating a shared vision are typified by how teachers developed a the sense of ownership over the changes. Staff after staff applied the standard of "Is it best for children?" when they revamped recess schedules, lunch room practices, how teams and room assignments were made, and how specials were run. Although each state had a radically different climate for changing to mixed-age primaries, the schools in these stories sought and made the change because they believed in it.

There Are Challenges

It Takes Time. What was consistently hard for teachers? One teacher summed up the consensus of all the teachers when she said, "It takes 2-3 years of learning as you go about designing curricular approaches and management systems that work for you". Those that found their stride continued. Those who never found a comfort zone stopped or transferred to other schools. As a

group, these teachers were typically hard on themselves and wanted success sooner than it materialized. They may be patient with children, but not always with themselves.

The Unpredictable Nature of Working with Support Services Designed for a Traditionally Graded World Internal design work for a classroom system of multiple grades has an expected learning curve, but the pattern of working with systems external to the classroom are harder to predict. For example, visiting support services such as vision and hearing screening or school pictures, tends to be set up to deal with one age level at a time. Year after year, schools often need to work out new agreements. A few schools experienced repeated success, but most still find the experience sapping energy each year and teachers talk about dreading the annual experience.

One support service issue tied to the daily life of classrooms is working with specialists like Title 1, Special Ed, Library, PE or Music. Some of these support specialist offer excellent support and were part of the vision making process, but not all. One media specialist had a hard time figuring out how to deal with mixed-age and at first refused to take them in mixed groups, or let kindergartners check out books. After much support from the principal and many conferences with the teachers, library time became mixed-aged and everyone had the same privileges. However, a PE Teacher embraced the idea of mixed-age and embarked on an action research project to see if mixed-age groupings reduced the time it took for children to learn roller blade skills. Two specialists, two responses.

Changes in Leadership. Several schools interviewed had principal changes. Some new principals shared the mixed-age vision of a staff and some did not. The teachers report a sense of weariness at needing to educate a new leader. One teacher said, "This is not her vision and she is not sure she agrees with it even though 75% of the teachers are doing it. Sometimes she makes decisions that adversely effect us without thinking about it. But so far she has been very fair when we talk to her and even changes many them. It makes me tired when I have so many other things to do. I used to be able to automatically count on the principal, now it takes a conference". But when there is shared vision and teachers assume leadership roles, these conversations can and do happen. Not all leadership changes were difficult, but it is a change teachers uniformly are concerned about.

Changes in Funding. As the financial climate changes in most states, so does the ease of maintaining and extending reforms. In all three states, there is less and less district level support and fewer state funds available to support development grants and mixed-aged innovations. For example, one school used to have Reading Recovery and Title 1 support for small groups in reading and math. Those supports are gone. In this same school, one classroom has three children who qualify for Day Treatment programs but who have been on a waiting list for over six months. Teachers say, "we put fires out and have less time for the demands of curriculum development and individualized instruction".

The level of funding in schools is a serious matter for all reform efforts, not just mixed-age. For example, in several of the schools there is no longer any central curriculum support and the school districts may spend less per student than 8 years ago. This immense change in budget climate makes maintaining any reform difficult. Each and every system has seen reduced staff development and material budgets.

Would each teacher interviewed do it again? "Yes", they say, as long as there is some administrative support. Even under difficult financial times, they would not stop. But, if administrative support stops, they would take what they learned and try to apply it to a straight-grade class and staying with their children for one or more years. This speaks to the commitment and dedication of these teachers, but also to the fact that every classroom exists in a system that can make reform harder to easier.

Principal's Voices Speak of Growth, Improved and Articulated Instruction, Being Positive About Difficulties

Professional Growth

Moving to mixed-age primaries is typically a challenge for the principal as well as the teaching staff. The principals interviewed all mentioned satisfied fatigue as the best way to describe what it is like to manage a major change in their delivery model. They were especially pleased to see so many teachers rise to the challenge, be willing to do prior study, learn new ways to teach, and refine good practices. As one principal put it, "the teachers were and still are the backbone of this school, but now I really think they are better at asking, 'Is this the best for children?'. They are better at describing why they use a strategy. And, they really do give children more opportunities".

Shared leadership was mentioned by each principal as well. As a group, these principals were gratified when teachers were leaders and team members at the same time. Teachers learned to assume more responsibility for setting up and running meetings, managing budgets, applying for grants, seeking consensus with team members, and making long term plans.

Articulating Curriculum

The standards movement has many strong points, including being a catalyst for having high and focused expectations for long term growth in children. All three of the state systems in these stories have set grade 3 benchmark standards, leaving it up to districts and schools to break down the standards into age/grade level expectations. Principals talk about having standards set in intervals as a mixed blessing. On one hand it gives mixed-age teachers the flexibility to let children develop at individual paces, but on the other hand it does not outline helpful guides for "grade-level-ness".

Finding the balance between rigid expectations and loose ones takes effort. Most of these principals arranged on-the-job time for teachers to examine and

align their curriculum with some type of outside framework of appropriate expectations like the Work Sampling System, the British Columbia Commonly Held Expectations, or the NCTM Standards. Each school going through this process found they had holes in either the adoption they were using or the way they delivered curriculum. Examples of the holes found were not enough problem solving in math; letting go of math manipulatives too soon; insufficient oral language development; not sufficiently linking literacy development to content study; expecting too much too soon; and, not letting basic skills set, take hold, and expand horizontally".

Principals report that teachers welcomed the opportunity to take a close and hard look at their curriculum. Multi-level alignment is time consuming but proved essential. It not only uncovers holes in existing curriculum and offers ideas for how to plug them, it gives staff a common understanding of developmental expectations. Referral rates for special education and Title 1 support become more consistent. And, test scores start to go up in grades 3 and 4.

Improved test scores are not something to take lightly. The standards movement appears to put tremendous pressure on schools to improve test scores, even at the cost of good practice. Mixed-age primary may not be the only thing that is improving test scores in these schools. But rather the intense focus on alignment, curriculum development, and improved instruction that occurred in the context of planning for and implementing mixed-age may well be the lynch pin.

Being Positive About Challenges

Some difficult issues can be opportunities instead of problems. These principals are not traditionalists and were skillful at making the system work for them and their schools. They acknowledge the effort needed, but are not stopped by problems. A variety of staffing issues and policies tied to tradition rather than good practice are two types of challenges that can be problems or opportunities.

Disgruntled Teachers Who Sabotage. When asked what remains a hard staffing challenge, principals gave examples of dealing with the few remaining staff who sabotage the efforts. Not all schools experience this but some do. One principal described the two staff members out of 25 who remained in straight grades, but still complain about the mixed-age teachers not getting any of the "hard kids", or even more overtly "mixed-age steals all of the attention".

Disgruntled staff drain emotions, but often have some element of truth in their dissatisfaction. Principals talked about finding ways to support both groups within the parameters of teacher contracts and sound personnel management. However, there does come a time and place for principals to encourage teachers to move to other schools with whom they can share a more comfortable vision of education; gain new skills and move on with the school agenda; or, think about changing to a career where they can be happier. These administrators had these hard conversations. Only one principal found

she needed to set up a teacher plan of assistance. As she put it, "I would have put this one staff member on a plan even without mixed-age". Another principal pointedly said, "it's my job to be positive".

At a different site, four (out of 20) teachers with a great deal of informal power systematically tried to undermine the mixed-age effort among staff and with parents. The principal had an outside mediator help the staff come to an agreement that consensus in their school meant 75% or more. When agreements were reached about going mixed-aged in all primary classrooms, the powerful four did not like it. They went to the union and complained. With principal support, the remaining staff asked for a conference with the union. At the conference they described the staff agreements and asked for a chance for the agreement to work before the union became involved. The union encouraged the unhappy four to apply for transfers if they did not like mixed-age after trying it. Within two years, two of the four went to schools with more personally comfortable visions and two moved closer to the larger group's vision.

One principal quipped that he wanted more teachers on both sides of issues to be on the social committee and so they could chat and accept each other's viewpoints. These hard social issues speak to the need to belong and be valued. Moving too quickly into mixed-age programs without a great deal of inclusive action on the part of teachers and the administration can undermine a good idea even when the whole staff is positive.

Staff Turnover. Even in well run schools with happy staff, teachers' spouses are transferred, lives change, and teachers retire. Finding the right match to replace effective team members is a challenge. Running a school with mixed-age primaries and all that leads up to makes it hard for new staff members to enter mid stream. Philosophy, teaching style, and personality matches help, but the shared history of growth and program building is irreplaceable. Principals confessed they make hiring mistakes. Taking the guess work out of this is aided by having the new staff member hired on a temporary basis, having team members sit in on interviews and observe the new teacher in a classroom when possible, and having the applicant observe in the program as well.

Dealing with Traditions in the District and State Structures. Bureaucracies change slowly for a reason, they maintain a system so we all know what to expect. But this same strength hinders innovations that keeps the system responsive. When changing to mixed-age, principals express a love-hate relationship with the bigger system.

An example of a potential glitch is finding consistent and effective subs who are comfortable with mixed-age. One principal felt strongly that it was important to give his teachers extra planning time during their first year of teaching mixed-age. He had money for subs and tried to get the same roving set. The Central Office did not like to commit specific people for the whole year

in advance to ensure having enough subs for emergencies. His successful plea to them was, "Tell me it is difficult, but not impossible".

Two other schools worked around the need for finding planning time in a different way. They worked for a year to modify their schedule around an early release once a week. The release day efforts required principals to coordinate bigger system issues such as bus schedules, after school child care, and soliciting information on meeting family needs when one day a week was on a different timetable.

Another example of finding your way through the system is in dealing with report cards. One of the states has a state-wide report card, but also has a waiver system set up for schools that wish to design their own. However, since the state report card has been in place for many years, it is steeped in non-changeable tradition in many sets of eyes. Getting straight answers took a persistent month of phone calls. School personnel will tell you report cards are often hotly contested regardless of who defines the format and content.

Summarizing the Stories

Taken together the stories from these three states and multiple schools offers a picture of the potentials and the pitfalls of mixed-age primary programs. Many of lessons echo other change efforts endeavoring to help schools look at what and how they teach. Patterns of shared vision and focused staff development are not unique. But some patterns, even if not radically different from other reform efforts, set in motion an intense reexamination of schools. In these schools, planning for and implementing mixed-age delivery systems in the primary grades helped teachers rethink and improve teaching practice and content. It brought families and teachers closer and set up new ways to partner. It provided professional satisfaction - and headaches - for teachers and principals. But most importantly, it kept going back to asking how to make the school work better for children.

Quotes from children take us back to what children think about how mixed-age classrooms impact them. When asked, "What is mixed-age?" Clay said, "It means first graders and second graders and kindergartens all get mixed. You don't know which are first and which are kindergarten". Aqueelah said, "We do everything together". Samuel said, "Sometimes it works".

Children's direct comments tell us they think it works fine, but young children also have a unique way of creating concrete metaphors. One that revisits the analogy on the best way to manage and care for plants came from seven year old Schuyler. Her teacher asked her what she learned after an extended study on communities. She said, "I learned that a community needs people or it would be ugly. The plants would die 'cause no one would take care of them".